The search for an American divine

By Jessica M. Parr
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In his recent biography of Billy Graham, Grant Wacker nicknamed the Baptist preacher “America’s pastor.” Owing to a prolific career that began in 1949 and has now spanned nearly 70 years, which saw him as the spiritual advisor to multiple U.S. presidents, the moniker is arguably fitting.

Graham began his career at a pivotal time in American history, as Cold War anxieties pitted American piety against “godless communists.” The 1950s saw the insertion of “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. New technology, in the form of television, gave birth to televangelists, with Graham as the granddaddy of them all. Some called this new movement “the electric church.” Over 80 percent of American homes had a television by the end of the decade. While channels and audience numbers were limited, there was a clear appetite for family-friendly fare. The timing of Graham’s career was fortuitous in a number of ways.

On more than one occasion, scholars have drawn parallels between Graham and 18th-century Anglican missionary George Whitefield. Whitefield’s career similarly had fortuitous timing, coming as evangelism was taking off in the British Atlantic. Whitefield too, was skillful in his use of available technology. Where Graham had television, and an innate talent for successful application of it to his ministry, Whitefield skillfully used the extensive 18th-century transatlantic print network. This may seem crass to the more religiously inclined. But along with being charismatic, both Graham and Whitefield were adept at marketing their versions of religious truth in a church community that lacked either geographical boundaries or the physical boundaries imposed by church walls. It is a process that many historians would concur that Whitefield started. Graham is, in many ways, a modern iteration of Whitefield’s career.

The men do have one critical difference. While Graham may have international admirers, he has a clear and incontestable American identity. Whitefield was (and is) unmistakably influential on the American Revolution onward, but the scope of his career meant that he left no permanent ties to either geography or denomination.

He owned land in England, South Carolina, and Georgia, but his lifestyle was largely nomadic and he tended to ignore denominational lines as counterproductive to getting out his message. In different places and at different times, various groups have sought to claim him. I note in the first chapter of my book on Whitefield the theft of his arm bone by an English admirer of Whitefield's who hoped to have a small connection to the man. The return of the bone to his unsealed crypt in Newburyport, Massachusetts, was marked by a solemn procession through the city streets, reminiscent of Whitefield's funeral cortege on a raw, rainy early October morning in 1770. It also demonstrates competing claims over Whitefield.

Posthumous interest in Whitefield represents a search for an American divine, one that continues (albeit with changing circumstances) into the 21st century. At its inception, the newly minted United States inherited a challenge of religious pluralism. There was no national church to serve as a single (hypothetical) guardian for the American soul, and the problem of religious pluralism only increased in the 19th century, as denominationalism expanded and new denominations emerged during the second and third great awakenings. Although most of the religiously observant spoke of piety, there was little consensus as to what that meant, other than that it was almost certainly Protestant. Despite these challenges, Americans looked for a way to describe post-Revolutionary religious life, as part of what Frank Lambert has called a revolution of religion. Undoubtedly due to his visibility and malleability—he was recognized by evangelical Americans from multiple Protestant traditions—Whitefield was an obvious choice of symbols as they struggled to envision an American religious landscape, and an American theology that could speak to a broad audience.

Echoes of the Pauline nature of Whitefield's ministry are still present among 21st century evangelical preachers, including Billy Graham, as they compete for the souls of Americans. Ten years ago, as it reflected back on Graham's career, the *New York Times* looked at the challenges evangelical Christianity will face as they watch for a successor to the aging minister. Just as generations of evangelical preachers saw Whitefield as inspirational, so too has Billy Graham become a symbol for younger generations of preachers to follow.

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